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【South Vietnam: The Communists stepped up their mortar and rocket attacks before the beginning of their 72-hour New Year's standdown early on 30 December.

During the past several days such barrages have been concentrated mostly in III Corps, where the enemy is apparently trying to divert allied attention from enemy troop and supply movements into the central part of the corps area. This effort and the continued enemy reconnaissance of Saigon and its western approaches indicate that the Communists are still preparing to attack the capital.

Although the Communists do not yet appear in position to attack Saigon in strength, enemy forces are deployed where they could attack allied positions in the outlying areas and in the subregions around the capital at any time.

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Laos: The Chinese Communists are pushing ahead with their road construction in northwest Laos.

Recent aerial photography shows that the road being built southward from Ban Botene is now motorable to within five miles of the Communist stronghold of Muong Sai. The road has been graveled and additional storage facilities and air defense positions have been constructed along the route. [redacted] as many as five battalions of Chinese troops have been brought across the border to provide security for construction crews.

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There are some signs that the Chinese may extend the road to the southwest beyond Muong Sai. Chinese troops have reportedly ordered villagers farther south to construct buildings, presumably to house road crews. [redacted] the Chinese intend to take the new road as far south as the village of Muong Houn, some 40 miles northeast of the government position at Pak Beng, but for the most part the Chinese are telling the local population that Muong Sai will be the end of the road.

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At the same time, there is fresh evidence that the Chinese are also undertaking road construction to the north in Phong Saly Province. [redacted]

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[redacted] some 600 trucks are involved in a current road building project in Phong Saly Province. At a minimum, the Chinese are probably improving the road between Meng-la and Phong Saly which they built in 1963. [redacted]

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Israel-Lebanon: Lebanon is receiving considerable moral and material support in the aftermath of the Israeli raid on the Beirut airport.

World reaction to the raid has been almost universally sympathetic to Lebanon. In condemning the Israeli action, many leaders, including Pope Paul, indicated a fear that the raid would lead to further conflict. Moscow's condemnation of the raid was strongly worded, but its only call for action against Israel thus far has been directed at the UN and is probably intended to discourage another round of direct Arab retaliation.

Jordan's King Husayn, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] called for an Arab summit meeting to meet the "constant danger." Fatah, the chief Arab terrorist organization, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] announced that it would launch a "rain" of revenge raids against Israel. Another commando group is reported to have expressed satisfaction that the Israeli raid had broadened the scope of the Middle East conflict. It stated that Lebanon up to now had been a silent partner in the dispute with Israel.

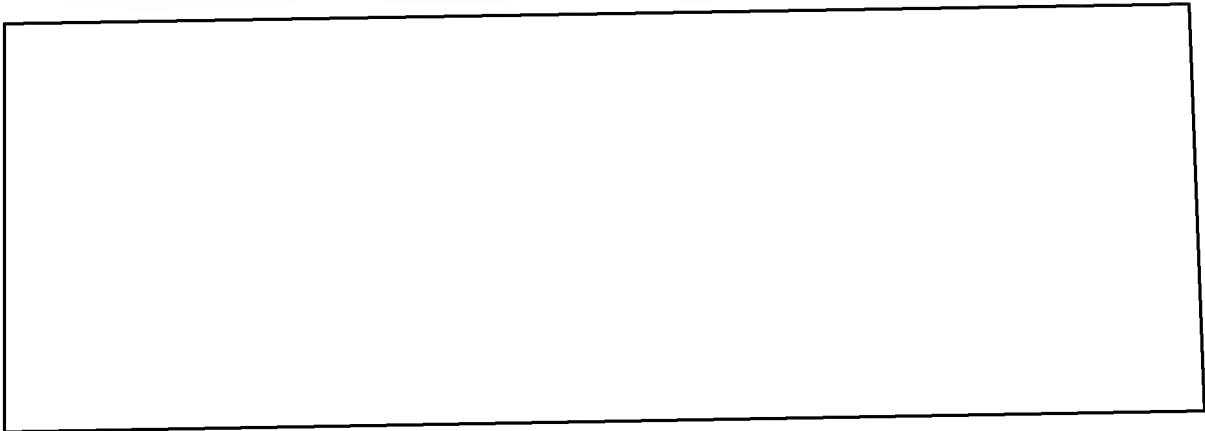
Israeli press reaction to the incident has been mixed. While most papers attempt to justify the action, there are doubts about the method and target of the Israeli reprisal as well as the degree of violence involved. Some commentators wonder whether there are not other methods of dealing with terrorists.

The 13 aircraft destroyed in the raid appear to be covered by insurance, and British underwriters have announced that they will be paying about \$17.4 million to Middle East Airlines alone. Several Arab airlines have sent planes to assist Lebanese companies hit by the raid, and two US airlines, Air France, and

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the Soviet Aeroflot have offered to loan Lebanon airliners until its own can be replaced.



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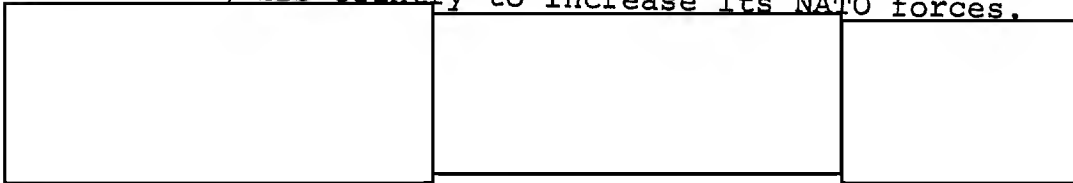
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Belgium: There are signs that King Baudouin wants to play a larger role in his country's political life.

The King, who until recently has been an exception to Belgium's tradition of strong constitutional monarchs, showed an interest last October in influencing his country to increase its NATO forces.



Another indication that the King is no longer content with a passive and symbolic role was the concern he expressed over the critical linguistic issue in a speech on 11 November. The royal family had previously avoided comment on this, the central fact of Belgian life. The King's Christmas message dealt with domestic political affairs, particularly the role of youth in modern society.

The Belgians probably welcome these moves on Baudouin's part. Any guidance and mediation he can provide as a peacemaker who stands above ordinary controversy would be useful in ameliorating the Fleming-Walloon disputes.



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Sierra Leone: Prime Minister Stevens reportedly has decided to shelve at least temporarily his proposal to transform Sierra Leone into a republic.

Stevens' decision apparently was reached because of unexpectedly strong opposition from influential elements in his own party. Stevens, anxious to bolster his shaky regime and to take advantage of the disorganized opposition party, had pressed for quick parliamentary approval of a draft republican constitution that would have greatly augmented the powers of the prime minister. He also may have believed that early proclamation of a republic would prevent the leaders and supporters of the former military regime--now being tried for treason--from appealing to the Queen's Privy Council, the court of last resort under the present constitution.

Stevens' failure to give his supporters an adequate advance briefing on the details of his proposal may account in large measure for their criticism. In addition, the proposed constitution is the same one that was once sponsored by the party now in political opposition and is therefore personally repugnant to some Stevens supporters. A number of influential Freetown legalists have also objected because of the sweeping powers given the prime minister.

The concept of a republican form of government remains popular among regime activists, however, and Stevens may again put forward the proposed constitution with some minor modifications at a propitious moment in the coming year. In view of his party's solid two-thirds majority in parliament, he should eventually be able to obtain parliamentary approval.

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